“Making America Gothic Again: Reading Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* Today”

PAUL KEEN

Abstract Few historical phenomena seem less gothic than democracy, an ideal that is virtually always figured in terms of rational enlightenment and transparency, all of which made the January 6th insurrection in Washington especially unsettling: an interruption, not just of the important business of the day but of the most fundamental progressivist narratives of western civilization. But there have been other, more ominous accounts of democracy that would have figured these events more as a culmination than an interruption of the larger historical forces at work. Writing in the aftermath of the insurrection, this paper returns to Alexis de Tocqueville’s warning in *Democracy in America* that however precious, democracy was not the antithesis of despotism but an historically specific set of conditions that lent themselves to new, more insidious forms of despotism which would “degrade men without tormenting them.” Confronted with the spectre of this unprecedented form of oppression, Tocqueville warned in classic gothic terms that its greatest threat may have been its obscurity: “the old words of despotism and of tyranny do not work. The thing is new, so I must try to define it since I cannot name it.” It was, by all measures, a classic gothic tale: democracy as the basis for rather than safeguard against unprecedented and even unnameable forms of tyranny. This paper asks how Tocqueville’s warning can better understand our own highly polarized political situation today. "help us to" in order to read Tocqueville’s warning can help us to better understand...

Democracy and the Gothic have not, until recently, tended to be part of the same discussion, within the academy or elsewhere. Before the January 6th insurrection in Washington, it was easier to think of it as an irony of history that the same decades that saw the beginnings of modern democracy were also distinguished by a vogue for the Gothic, with its cast of sinister villains, dark supernatural forces, and uncanny coincidences, or at least to see these
as two sides of a dialectic of modernity, grounded in a faith in the progressive force of rational inquiry but shadowed by an enduring fascination with everything that had had to be expelled to make this vision of the future possible. Democracy was everything the Gothic was not, which explains much of the appeal of both. Democracy’s association with transparency and collective agency contrasted sharply with what Enlightenment reformers derided as “the dreams of romance and the dogmas of superstition” (the equivalent of today’s conspiracy theories) which, they believed, would be exposed and eliminated through robust critical debate (Godwin, Political 15). Reformers’ metaphors implied that history was beckoning; the changes they hailed were as inevitable as the dawn and as welcome as the sunlight breaking through an overcast sky. Democracy was on the right side of history; the Gothic offered a powerful reminder of why this mattered.

For critics in our current times, who, consciously or otherwise, have tended to equate the rise of liberal democracy with a similar kind of providential teleology (Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history”), the January 6th insurrection marked a dramatic interruption of an admirable democratic tradition, a momentary return of the night of ignorance that reformers had struggled to vanquish. The horror of the violence was amplified by an uncanny sense that the rioters were inhabiting a bizarre parallel world driven by a kind of messianic certainty fueled by an uncritical devotion to alternative facts. Gothic fiction seemed, for a moment, to have hijacked democracy. All this may be true, but for those whose response to the crisis was in part to turn to history, the situation was less straightforward. Nowhere is it more complicated, perhaps, than when viewed through the lens of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, published in two parts, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840. For Tocqueville, American democracy was always already gothic, a story balanced between the promise of a new era and the terror of unprecedented forms of despotism. The question is how to understand the tumultuous events in recent years in terms of his much earlier warning.

In their 2018 warning about the current political landscape in the U.S., Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt acknowledge that the question “Is our democracy in danger” is one that they, like most Americans, “never thought they’d be asking” (1). Rather than opting for either complacency or panic, Levitsky and Ziblatt frame their study in terms of a clear-sighted recognition
that “over the past two years [2016-2018], we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States–but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places” (1). Even more ominous than these unprecedented comments and actions by leading politicians may be the public’s appetite for them: the extraordinary fact is that Donald Trump’s massive popularity with Republican voters continues to grow as indictments against him multiply, all of them supported by evidence that seems to confirm his willingness to hijack democracy to retain his hold on power. His overwhelming success in the Iowa caucus (the first event in the primary process) as I submit my final version of this paper–a landslide victory whose magnitude seemed to have been increased rather than lessened by the fact that he faces ninety-one felony counts, many of them for attempting to subvert democracy–has underscored for many political commentators just how serious this threat is.

As Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest, part of gauging just how vulnerable American democracy has become is developing a more nuanced historical understanding of the situation, both within the U.S. and in terms of “the historical experiences of other nations” (6). This is true in part, they explain, because the current “erosion of our democratic norms” must be understood as the culmination of already existing problems (6). “Donald Trump may have accelerated this process, but he didn’t cause it. The challenges facing American democracy run deeper” (9). Levitsky and Ziblatt are careful not to minimize the dangers of Trump’s authoritarian instincts or of most Republicans’ capitulation, but as they point out, these dangers are themselves enabled by the “extreme partisan polarization” that “began in the 1980s and 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s” (9).² This reminder is especially helpful given the tendency of the whiplash speed of the news cycle and the melodrama of current events to foster a paralyzing form of collective amnesia, but one of the advantages of a historical perspective may be a recognition that current problems are rooted in a network of cultural and political dynamics that are both much older and even more deeply rooted. This is where Tocqueville’s Democracy in America may be helpful. The words of its very title–democracy in America–which had seemed reassuringly unremarkable just days before, took on a new urgency when this text was pulled off the bookshelf on the morning after January 6th.
The question that this essay will pursue is: how can a closer reconsideration of Tocqueville's influential assessment of the promise and problems of American democracy during its relatively early days, in an age when democracy itself was still the focus of revolutionary struggle in Europe and what would become Canada, a struggle that continues in many parts of the world even today, help us to understand the challenges which confront American democracy today? How, more specifically, can the ominous gothic overtones of Tocqueville's analysis help to clarify these dynamics, not just in terms of Trump's designs on power, but his sustained popularity with so many millions of voters in the face of so much (apparent) evidence of his determination to sabotage democracy? How can a more careful focus on this gothic dimension of Tocqueville's study help to clarify the existential underpinnings of these dynamics, or in other words, the cultural roots of these political problems?

The descendant of a Norman aristocratic family whose liberal politics had not been enough to shelter his great-grandfather from the guillotine, Tocqueville had seized on the opportunity to leave France to write a report on the American penitentiary system in large part because of his distaste for the outcome of the 1830 July revolution, and especially with the appointment of Louis Phillippe as the new king. Officially, his task in America was to compare the Pennsylvania System, in which prisoners were placed in solitary confinement night and day with individual work being done by each inmate alone in their cell, with the Auburn System in New York State, in which prisoners remained in solitary confinement apart from time spent working collectively in strict silence, but his real focus during his nine months there was his sociological investigation into American democracy.

As John Stuart Mill pointed out in his 1840 response in the *Edinburgh Review*, *Democracy in America*’s enormous popularity was due in part to its extraordinary impartiality in an age when virtually every book about America amounted to “a party pamphlet...pressed into the service of one party or of the other” (156). As Mill wryly noted, it didn't hurt that one of Tocqueville’s most famous lines, “the tyranny of the majority,” having been “trumpeted by Sir Robert Peel,” had become “one of the pillars of Conservatism”–which ensured the book’s improbable popularity with the English public even
though (as Mill saw it) Tocqueville’s “practical conclusions lean towards Radicalism” (156).

Tocqueville has been characterized as everything from a Burkean conservative to a Burkean liberal to a liberal-conservative, but he tended to view himself as a center-left liberal, actively supporting progressive reforms though this was often a way of warding off what he viewed as the dehumanizing effects of socialism.³ Jack Lively suggests that the fact that “from the first, [Tocqueville] was hailed by every shade of political opinion as its exponent and defender” was itself an apt reflection of the inherent complexity of Tocqueville’s political thought, which remained irreducible to any one ideological perspective (7–8). Rather than aligning himself with systems, he prided himself on thinking beyond ideology by focusing on potential consequences. As he said in a letter to Henry Reeve, the original English translator of Democracy in America, he embraced “alternately democratic or aristocratic prejudices... I have only opinions, or rather I have only one passion, the love of liberty and human dignity” (qtd in Democracy, lvi).

It was both his misfortune and his good luck to have been born at a time (1805) when the political landscape had become radically unclear. For a thinker who considered his independence from either position (aristocratic or democratic) to be one of his intellectual strengths, the transitional nature of the age, in which an older hegemonic order had passed without a new order having fully established itself, was not only a challenge but also an extraordinary historical opportunity. “I came into the world at the end of a long Revolution that, after destroying the old state, had created nothing lasting. The aristocracy was already dead when I was born, and democracy did not yet exist” (lvii).

The extreme nature of this transitional moment did not, however, blind him to the impact of a more fundamental “progress towards universal levelling” which, he argued, had been developing for centuries (9). It was, he insisted, “a providential fact...it is universal, it is lasting, it escapes every day from human power; all events, like all men, serve its development” (11–12). For Tocqueville, it was this final detail that hinted at the fundamentally gothic rather than beneficent nature of this “levelling” dynamic whose ultimate horizon was democracy:
Everywhere you saw the various incidents in the lives of peoples turned to the profit of democracy; all men aided it by their efforts: those who had in view contributing to its success and those who did not think of serving it; those who fought for it and even those who declared themselves its enemies; all were pushed pell-mell along the same path, and all worked in common, some despite themselves, others without their knowledge, blind instruments in the hands of God. (10)

Tocqueville’s account of this unstoppable providential force, to which all contributed whether they supported it or even recognized it or not, echoed gothic novels’ descriptions of an equally omnipotent sense of momentum, the feeling of being “hurried along with an irresistible force,” as Caleb Williams described his obsessive curiosity in William Godwin’s Caleb Williams, or carried “onwards, like a hurricane” as Victor Frankenstein described his own equally obsessive research, “urged . . . forward” by a “resistless, and almost frantic impulse” (Godwin 170; Shelley 36). Tocqueville’s account of democracy’s relentless historical progress lacked none of this melodrama, or the frenzied sense of helplessness it generated. “Democracy!” he wrote to a friend,

Don’t you see that these are the waters of the flood? Don’t you see them advance constantly by a slow and irresistible effort? You withdraw, the waves continue their march. You flee, they run behind you. Here you are finally in your last refuge and scarcely have you sat down to take a breath when the waves have already covered the space that still separates you from them. (12)

“Placed in the middle of a rapid river,” he warned in the book’s “Introduction,” “we obstinately fix our eyes on some debris that we still see on the bank, while the current carries us away and pushes us backward toward the abyss” (17). Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, propelled irresistibly into the future by the storm we call progress, the rise of democracy was ultimately a strangely undemocratic force: it “escapes every day from human power,” pushing everyone “pell-mell along the same path” (17). However much democracy may have been celebrated for the agency that it extended to whatever portion of the population counted as “the people,” the incontestable fact of its arrival, whether people willed it or not, defied agency altogether.

The effect of these sorts of descriptions, whether in novels or long two-volume political treatises, is one of gothic terror, but this experience of terror, Freud reminds us, is bound up with Gothic literature’s recurring sense of the
uncanny—the recognition of what “ought to have remained...secret and hidden...but has come to light” (345). If, as David Punter suggests, the Gothic has always been haunted “by a painful understanding of the uncanny nature of knowledge itself...by the weight of a history, just behind its shoulder, which proves resistant not only to understanding but, more importantly, to change,” then this discomfort was amplified by a more fundamental awareness “of mutability, an understanding of the ways in which history itself, and certainly narratives of history, are not stable, do not constitute a rock onto which we might cling—indeed, as Gothic has always sought to demonstrate to us, there are no such rocks, there is no sure foundation” (ix-x). This may be the real lesson implicit in the gothic terror that shadows Tocqueville’s historical account of American democracy: the dangers of relying on illusory escapes from the “rapid river” of history. Tocqueville did not use the term “gothic” in his description of American democracy and his work is virtually never mentioned in discussions of Gothic fiction, but its focus on democracy as a form of despotism that is haunted by the open secret of its inseparability from all of the qualities that it would seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with, suggested a kind of uncanny terror whose internal dynamics can only be understood in terms of the theoretical discussions that we have come to associate with the Gothic.

If, as Ruth Bienstock Anolik suggests, “the Gothic is marked by an anxious encounter with otherness, with the dark and mysterious unknown,” this anxious apprehension of self-difference was precisely Tocqueville’s point about the emancipatory narratives that had come to be associated with modern democracy (1). In Caleb Williams and Frankenstein, this sense of the uncanny was bound up with the radically double-edged nature of knowledge itself. More specifically, in direct opposition to the Baconian injunction beloved by Enlightenment and Romantic reformers, every major character in both novels discovers that acquiring more knowledge only heightens their sense of powerlessness. For Tocqueville, this uncanny sense of terror turned on the extraordinary fact that democracy, far from vanquishing tyranny, “offered singular opportunities for the establishment of despotism” (1245). But it was not just that “despotism, which is dangerous in all times, is to be particularly feared in democratic countries” (889). Worse, he warned: “[I]f despotism came to be established among the democratic nations of today...it will
resemble nothing of what preceded it in the world; our contemporaries cannot find the image of it in their memories” (1248). Like classic Gothic fiction, the unprecedented and unnameable form of this new threat added to its shadowy omnipotence: “[T]he old words of despotism and of tyranny do not work. The thing is new, so I must try to define it, since I cannot name it” (1248-49). The old form of “tyranny weighed prodigiously on a few...it was violent and limited,” but this new more sinister form “would have other characteristics; it would be more extensive and milder, and it would degrade men without tormenting them” (1247, 1248).

If this new form of “administrative despotism,” as Tocqueville called it, anticipated Foucault’s account of disciplinary power, this was in part a reflection of Tocqueville’s concerns about the relentless drive towards centralization which seemed to him to be an inevitable part of democratic government (1231, 1249). “In the last half-century that has just gone by,” he warned, “centralization has grown everywhere in a thousand different fashions” (1217). In his review, Mill argued for a far more positive view of “central authority” which, “in collecting and communicating information, giving advice to the local bodies, and even framing rules for their observance, is no hinderance, but an aid” (169). But for Tocqueville, progress was, more often than not, simply a byword for increasing bureaucratic reach and efficiency. “Chains and executioners, those are the crude instruments formerly used by tyranny; but today civilization has perfected even despotism itself, which seemed however to have nothing more to learn” (418). In an earlier time, “princes had, so to speak, materialized violence,” but “the democratic republics of today have made violence as entirely intellectual as the human will that it wants to constrain...it leaves the body alone and goes right to the soul” (418). Nothing was more gothic, it turned out, than the semblance of freedom.

This administrative drive may have been particularly characteristic of democracies, but Tocqueville’s observations during the five years between the publication of his first volume in 1835 and the second volume in 1840, had convinced him that European nations were not far behind:

There is no country in Europe in which the public administration has not become not only more centralized, but also more inquisitorial and more detailed; everywhere it penetrates more than formerly into private affairs; it regulates in its own way more actions and smaller actions, and every day it
establishes itself more and more beside, around and above each individual in order to assist him, advise him and constrain him. (1226)

In this new, more sinister form of despotism, especially characteristic of democracies but increasingly being replicated in European nations, oppressors would appear to citizens not like “tyrants, but rather tutors” (1248): “an immense and tutelary power” that would resemble more benevolent forms of paternalism except that its goal is not “to prepare men for manhood” but “only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves, provided that they think only about enjoying themselves...This is how it makes the use of free will less useful and rarer every day; how it encloses the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself” (1251). Education, far from encouraging the sorts of critical thinking required for active citizenship, had already become a full-blown ideological status apparatus: “[I]t is the State that takes charge of inspiring sentiments in each generation and providing each generation with ideas. Uniformity reigns in studies as in all the rest; there diversity, like liberty, disappears every day” (1223).

However sinister this ever-expanding regime of administrative despotism may have been, Tocqueville’s insistence that growing conditions of social equality were the ultimate source of these problems may have been even more foreboding. For Enlightenment reformers, and for reasons that Tocqueville completely understood, the ideal of equality was the bedrock of progressive social visions. But far from reinforcing liberty, he explained, “equality of conditions” (4), in the absence of a broader cultural shift capable of fostering new forms of community, only encouraged the sorts of isolation and distraction that Charles Taylor describes as “the malaise of modernity.”

Contrary to our unexamined assumptions which tend to align flourishing democracies with a strong sense of community, for Tocqueville it was clear that equality “separates [the modern citizen] from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back towards himself alone and threatens finally to enclose him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (884). Rather than helping to foster a sense of community, as Enlightenment reformers believed, equality “places men side by side, without a common bond to hold them” (889).
The dark underside of individualism was “atomism,” which, if it had undermined the “economic and social barriers” of older societies, had also negated “the sense of cohesiveness and responsibility that made an aristocratic society an organic whole” (Zetterbaum 59). If American democracy was distinguished from both ancient democracy and contemporary Europe’s ancien rôgimes by its fusion of political and social equality, then as Pierre Manet has argued, the lack of any well-developed sense of community meant that it was also a “dis-society,” a nation of virtual strangers, joined only by their mutual location in the pursuit of their self-interest (12). Nor was equality one problem amongst many; for Tocqueville, equality was the “generating fact” that ultimately explained all of these other problems: a many-headed monster whose corrosive tendencies converged in these unprecedented forms of despotism that subjected citizens to new kinds of servitude by convincing them it felt like freedom (4).

Tocqueville was not the only critic warning about this existential threat. Anticipating Matthew Arnold’s chilling suggestion that humans were little more than “pebbles which waves draw back, and fling,” a verse taken from his poem “Dover Beach” (probably written in 1851), Mill suggested in his account of this section of Tocqueville’s argument that “the members of a democratic community are like the sands of the seashore, each very minute, and no one adhering to any other” (28). But Tocqueville was especially insightful in his uncompromising analysis of the broader implications of this problem. Having been left “isolated and defenceless” by “the same equality that makes him independent of...his fellow citizens,” the modern individual feels overwhelmed by a sense of “his own insignificance and weakness,” and begins to accept public opinion uncritically, mistaking these ideas for his own (719).

The market-driven version of individualism promoted by modern democracy turned out to be the antithesis of any meaningful form of real individualism if that implied an ability to think for one’s self. Freedom, where it was conceived in such highly individualized terms, suggests a kind of alienation that was all the worse for being mistaken for its opposite.

These dangers were compounded by the tendency of equality to promote a “secret restlessness” that stemmed from an obsessive “desire to acquire the goods of this world” (944, 938). Everywhere he traveled in America, Tocqueville found evidence of Americans’ unflagging commitment to the pursuit
of happiness, but the emphasis tended to be on the pursuit rather than any meaningful form of genuine satisfaction. He noted: “It is a strange thing to see with what kind of feverish ardor the Americans pursue [material] well-being, and how they appear tormented by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest road that can lead to it” (943). Overwhelmed by the existential pressures of their isolation and preoccupied with the “hidden war” to acquire more wealth than their neighbors, modern citizens retreated from any engagement with public life into political apathy (996). These negative dynamics were compounded, Tocqueville warned in terms that are uncomfortably familiar today, by a narrowly utilitarian approach to knowledge. Endlessly focused on practical ends, their approach to science was animated by “a selfish, mercenary and industrial taste for the discoveries of the mind” as “a desire to utilize knowledge,” in stark contrast with “the disinterested passion that is aroused” by “a pure desire to know” (781). Matthew Arnold’s strikingly similar complaints about British attitudes in Culture and Anarchy are an important reminder that this was a much broader problem, but for Tocqueville, Americans’ utilitarian leanings were intensified by the lethal combination of “their entirely Puritan origin” and their “uniquely commercial habits,” neither of which leant themselves to more philosophical or cultural inclinations (768).

The problem was that the benefits of the utilitarian approach were very short-term because their focus on productivity was always at the expense of more profound forms of inquiry—the “ardent, proud and disinterested love of the true that leads men” to the sorts of “abstract sources of truth” which ultimately sustain any healthy community (781). Neglecting these higher philosophical commitments, Tocqueville warned, would ultimately prepare the way for the collapse of civilization itself: “Because Roman civilization died following the invasion of the barbarians, we are perhaps too inclined to believe that civilization cannot die otherwise” (785).

It was a perfect storm of interconnected dynamics which ensured that democracy, far from being the full expression of liberty, remained uniquely vulnerable to unprecedented forms of despotism. In many ways, it was an even more fundamental critique than Adorno and Horkheimer’s warning about the Enlightenment’s “indefatigable self-destructiveness” or Marx’s point about the gap in liberal capitalist society between the perfect equality
of the political sphere (one person one vote) and the more deeply entrenched “inequalities and dependencies of everyday life” which defined the broader civil society (Adorno and Horkheimer xi; Eagleton, Why ix). This dystopic sense of modernity contrasted sharply with Tocqueville’s very Burkean vision of the organic unity of traditional societies. “Placed an immense distance from the people, the nobles nonetheless took the type of benevolent and tranquil interest in the fate of the people that the shepherd gives to his flock; and without seeing the poor man as their equal, they watched over his lot as a trust put in their hands by Providence” (19). The people, meanwhile, accepted the benefits and did not question the rights of their rulers. They loved them when they were lenient and just and submitted without difficulty and without servility to their rigors as to inevitable evils sent to them by the hand of God. Custom and mores had, moreover, established limits to tyranny and founded a kind of right in the very midst of force. (19)

It is hard to imagine a more idealized account of aristocratic hierarchy. But despite this Burkean nostalgia for a benevolent aristocratic order which Mill challenged in an otherwise very appreciative review, Tocqueville’s criticisms of democracy should not be read as conservative, or even necessarily as pessimistic. For one thing, he remained clear that the “democratic revolution we are witnessing is an irresistible fact against which it would be neither desirable nor wise to struggle” (693). However tempting it might have been to some to try to turn the clock back, he insisted that approaching these new problems by trying to reimpose aristocratic solutions was “sterile work:” “[A]ll those who try to base liberty on privilege and on aristocracy will fail” (1283, 1263). What was needed was “a new political science...for an entirely new world” (16).

However idealized Tocqueville’s nostalgic view of traditional societies may have been, his commitment to this vision does provide the clearest sense of the gothic nature of modern democracy: its corrosive tendency to “degrade” human life by undermining the forms of social connectivity and community that helped to foster healthy forms of subjectivity. The absence of this, even when it was hailed in the name of liberty, heightened the appeal of apparently radical but misguided forms of agency that could be all too easily exploited in the name of illusory forms of freedom. It is instructive that, like many radical humanists of his day, Tocqueville reserved his most scathing
criticism for industrial capitalists or what he called “the manufacturing aristocracy that we see arising before our eyes,” which, he warned, “is one of the harshest that has appeared on the earth” (985). Modernity was not some abstract philosophical concept but a historically specific set of economic, political, and social conditions. Like Thomas Carlyle, he complained that the cash nexus that bound workers and employers together had dissolved any meaningful social bond: “[T]hey are not linked in a permanent way, either by habit or by duty” (984).

Focusing on the human cost of factory labor, in which “the man becomes degraded as the worker improves,” he took direct aim at Adam Smith’s famous celebration of assembly-line production in Wealth of Nations: “What should you expect from a man who has used twenty years of his life making pinheads” (982). It would be far better, he insisted, if a nation’s leaders concentrated on producing “great men” rather than “great things with men,” if they “attach[ed] less value to the work and more to the worker, and to remember constantly that a nation cannot long remain strong when each man is individually weak” (1275-1276). Nor did he share Burke’s aversion to the potentially turbulent effects of activism. As Eduardo Nolla points out in his exemplary introduction to the Liberty Fund edition of Democracy in America, Tocqueville believed that apathy was a greater threat to democracy than temporary anarchy, though he did distinguish between positive and negative forms of instability (cxxxix–cxl). As Mill put it in his review, Tocqueville’s “fear, both in government and in intellect and morals, is not too great liberty, but of too ready submission; not of anarchy, but of servility” (35). Tocqueville would have rejected characterizations of himself as fatalistic or even pessimistic. Indeed, he explained, had he resigned himself to the triumph of the worst features of democracy, “[he] would not have written the work that you have just read” (1276–1277). On the contrary, he “wanted to put forth in full light the risks that equality makes human independence run” because he was convinced that however formidable, “[he did] not believe them insurmountable” (1277).

Both the Democracy in America volumes were structured, from beginning to end, as an intervention: a wake-up call intended to be even more effective for being brutally honest in a way that Tocqueville knew no one (especially not his American readers) would thank him for. The irresistible revolution
that had culminated, in the past half century, in modern democracy could not be turned back, but this did not mean that people lacked the opportunity to manage it if they acted immediately. The key was the timing: “The movement that sweeps [modern nations] along is already so strong that it cannot be suspended, and it is not yet so rapid as to despair of directing it. Their fate is in their hands; but soon it escapes them” (15). However unsparing his criticisms may have been, Tocqueville also took pains to warn his readers against a rush to judgment. As he pointed out in his “Introduction,” modern democracy had been handicapped by the resistance of the aristocratic regimes which ought to have nurtured it: “[D]emocracy has been abandoned to its wild instincts; it has grown up like those children, deprived of paternal care, who raise themselves in the streets of our cities, and who know society only by its vices and miseries” (18).

It is an extraordinary image: democracy as a streetwise child, forced to grow up quickly and, as a result, attuned to the dark side of human nature and therefore incapable of embracing the positive ideals that ought to have distinguished it. But this image, as arresting as it is, also suggested an important element of Tocqueville’s argument, which was that the problem with the democratic revolution was that it had not gone far enough. It had ushered in a political arrangement capable of supporting people’s selfish pursuit of individual prosperity, or what Tocqueville called “the material aspect of society,” but it had failed to develop new forms of genuine community based on a more fully developed sense of civic consciousness: “the laws, ideas, habits and mores, the change that would have been necessary to make this revolution useful” (18–19).

In other words, these “material” changes in the political and economic spheres had developed in the absence of the sort of corresponding cultural changes that would have been necessary for the revolution to manifest itself in new forms of genuinely rewarding freedom and community beyond the pursuit of wealth. As Mill put it in his gloss on Tocqueville’s analysis of the French Revolution, “while the equalization of conditions was thus rapidly reaching its extreme limits, no corresponding progress of public spirit was taking place in the people at large” (167). In the absence of these more fundamental changes, Tocqueville warned, we “have democracy, minus what must attenuate its vices and bring out its natural advantages” (19). But however
imperfect this orphaned, “wild” version of democracy may have been, he insisted, it was equally true that it was still early days. Democracy was still best viewed as an experiment or a work in progress in which all the problems were clear but without any corresponding sense of its future potential: “[S]eeing already the evils that it brings, we are still unaware of the good that it can give” (19).

Tocqueville's disillusionment with events in France in the years after the publication of volume one—what he saw as both the increasing despotism of the new regime and people's growing political apathy—heightened the second volume's alarmist tone, but it did not lessen his determination to offer it as an intervention: “I feel full of fears and full of hopes. I see great dangers that it is possible to avert, great evils that can be avoided or limited; and I become more and more confirmed in this belief that, to be honest and prosperous, it is still enough for democratic nations to want to be so” (1284). What mattered was that people recognized the urgency of the situation. He may have blamed Enlightenment rationalism for the stunted forms of community and spiritual emptiness that paved the way for democratic despotism, but Tocqueville's solution remained clear: “[P]our out enlightenment lavishly in democratic nations in order to elevate the tendencies of the human mind. Democracy without enlightenment and liberty would lead the human species back to barbarism” (1267). His disdain for Americans' narrowly utilitarian approach to knowledge suggests just how strongly he believed the power of ideas could be when approached in a suitably disinterested or philosophical spirit.

The question, then, is how Tocqueville would have viewed the subsequent history of democracy in America, especially the January 6th insurrection and Trump's extraordinary popularity ever since: Was it the sort of aberration that more optimistic accounts of American politics sometimes imply, or an almost predictable culmination of the worst features—the “dangers” and “evils”—that were baked into the system from its earliest days? Ought it to be viewed as a confirmation that these earlier groups had missed their chance to direct democracy along a more genuinely progressive path, or a reminder that these efforts remained the task of each new generation? Are the disruptions of the past few years, including Trump's virtually untouchable status during the primary race for 2024 despite a growing list of indictments,
an unsettling confirmation of Tocqueville’s warning that “democracy without enlightenment and liberty would lead the human species back to barbarism” (1267), or, as Trump’s supporters insist, do they represent a renewal of Tocqueville’s sense of the urgency with which modern tyranny must be resisted?

If one of Tocqueville’s most widely acknowledged strengths lay in his warning that conformity (reinforced by creeping bureaucratic regulation) would become the greatest modern form of tyranny, would he not have embraced these protests as patriotic manifestations of a misguided but fundamentally correct spirit of resistance, raging against the machinery of modernity, or would he have detected an ironic but even more fundamental form of conformity lurking at the heart of their rallies and slogans? Virtually every critic agrees on the centrality of Tocqueville’s commitment to the idea of freedom in his political thought, but there is little consensus on what exactly he meant by it.

It is not hard, given Tocqueville’s allergic reaction to big government and his tendency to lay the blame for growing America’s larger cultural problems on a misguided emphasis on social equality, to understand why he has been embraced by an American conservative tradition, but one doesn’t have to read too deeply against the grain to see in Tocqueville’s gothic narrative of American democracy a more fundamental critique that would unsettle this alignment. Read in the shadow of the January 6th insurrection, what stands out is Tocqueville’s warning about the convergence of dangerous tendencies at both the higher and lower ends of the political spectrum: on the one hand, the failure of this orphaned version of democracy which had been “abandoned to its wild instincts” to nurture the sort of mature political culture that would inspire healthy leadership, and on the other hand, the tendency of its utilitarian ethos and obsession with financial gain to produce the sort of existential restlessness that would make the broader populace especially vulnerable to failures in their leadership. Both problems sowed the seeds of toxic forms of patriotism that promised people a heightened sense of personal meaning by offering to make them part of a culture of protest that had come detached, not just from demonstrable facts, but more fundamentally, from any respect for the authority of factual evidence. This is not to equate utilitarianism with a disregard for the importance of facts. Few thinkers were
as tenaciously focused on factual evidence than critics such as James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. The point, as thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno suggested, is that its focus on applied knowledge at the expense of a larger self-reflexive critical perspective led to a culture that, however paradoxically given these origins, has become worryingly untroubled by the lack of any factual basis in many of its own positions.\footnote{6}

In an ironic but important sense, the cries of flag-waving right-wing protest-er-activists for “freedom” are not wrong. Befuddled liberal critics might, with good reason, wonder what freedoms these protestors can possibly be lacking in a capitalist democratic world grounded on the sanctity of individual rights. But read with Tocqueville’s warnings about the gothic nature of modern democracy in mind, these cries can be read as alienated acknowledgments that the forms of freedom on offer within it have always been illusory. As Herbert Marcuse had argued (from a leftist perspective that would horrify them!) in One-Dimensional Man, capitalist modernity had never enabled the more meaningful forms of subjectivity and community that could foster genuine freedom. Protestors’ disdain for their country’s democratic foundations, whether it is the violence of the January 6th insurrection or the sheer intransigence of their insistence that an election was rigged despite all evidence to the contrary, is, in this light, an ironically articulate statement of the fact that modern democracy, in its realized forms, amounted to a “dis-society” that could never deliver the kinds of meaningful life they believe they were promised.

The dark gothic irony of all of this is the tendency of these protestors, energized by a vitriolic disdain for anything to the left of Trump or his benighted doppelganger, Rick DeSantis, to embrace the conditions that fostered these problems in the first place. Incapable of translating their jagged sense of grievance into a critique of the existential conditions that fostered this sense of alienation, and energized by an unquenchable appetite for the kinds of outsized leadership that seems to understand their outrage, they have doubled down on the source of their problems by embracing a neoliberal version of freedom as an absence of restrictions grounded in a nostalgia for a history that, as Tocqueville was already warning, never existed, or at least not in the “great” forms peddled by these leaders. Faced with the worrying contradictions that he had identified in modern democracy, Toc-
Tocqueville’s response had been to “pour out enlightenment lavishly in democratic nations in order to elevate the tendencies of the human mind,” but the reactionary restlessness that culminated in the January 6th insurrection had been fueled by the opposite impulse: to respond to this sense of existential lack by negating the role of both an enlightenment commitment to evidence-based critical inquiry and any possibility of cultural enrichment as the sinister designs of liberal elites (1267).

If Tocqueville’s analysis of the dangerous convergence of these problems seems prescient considering the insurrection, so too does his warning that these potential problems could manifest themselves most jarringly in the context of elections. Despite his many concerns about Americans’ restlessness, Tocqueville remained confident that “the Americans are used to having all kinds of elections. Experience has taught them what level of agitation they can reach and where they must stop,” but his careful observation that “until now, the political circumstances in which the nation has found itself during elections have not presented any real danger,” may have been more ominous than intended (222, 223). As he went on to add, “the election of the President of the United States can still be considered a period of national crisis” (223) that inevitably stirs up the most dangerous passions:

> As the election approaches, intrigues become more active; agitation, more intense, and more widespread. . . . The entire nation falls into a feverish state; the election is then the daily story of the public papers, the subject of individual conversations, the goal of all moves, the object of all thoughts, the sole interest of the moment. (224)

Even so, Tocqueville concluded that “as soon as fortune has decided, this ardor dissipates; everything becomes calm, and the river, once overflowing, retreats peacefully to its bed” (224). What his book left unanswered was: What if it didn’t? What if one of the contenders simply refused to accept that fortune had decided, and urged his followers to do likewise? What if the existential restlessness he depicted made citizens especially prone to the “wild” forms of misplaced patriotism that one might expect to find in this sort of “orphaned” democracy? And what if these tensions were manipulated to such a degree that they could be used to provoke the kinds of riots that could push democracy itself to its breaking point? More broadly, would his unrelenting critique of the dangers of centralization have disposed him to sympathize with modern-day conservatives’ war on big government, or
would he have rejected neoliberalism as an ugly manifestation of unfettered individualism and the dangers this kind of selfishness posed for political stability?\footnote{7}

At the very least, he would have viewed his book as a warning of the potential for these sorts of problems to arise, in part because of his impression of the intellectual timidity of the American people he met: “I know of no country,” he insisted, where “there reigns less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America” (417). “In America, the majority draws a formidable circle around thought. Within these limits, the writer is free; but woe to him if he dares to go beyond them” (418). This lack of intellectual courage and curiosity, which was compounded by Americans’ utilitarian approach to knowledge — “a selfish mercenary and industrial taste for the discoveries of the mind” (781) — was especially dangerous because of the barriers that democracy raised against real debate: “It is very difficult to make the men who live in democracies listen, when you are not talking to them about themselves” (1147). As Jean Bethke Elshtain had warned in her 1995 intervention, Democracy on Trial, Tocqueville’s warning of “a world in decline” as a direct result of the “corruption of [Americans’] way of life” has been exacerbated by the steady growth of the kinds of “bad individualism” that he had identified as a central part of this problem, and by the ease with which ideals such as “freedom” and “democracy” could be exploited for cheap political gain (9, 14). Marvin Zetterbaum’s reminder that Tocqueville had emphasized, “in his notes for the final volume of the European Revolution [that] ‘we...live in an inextricable confusion of ideas, to the great advantage of demagogues and of despots’” has lost none of its currency (54).

What makes Tocqueville’s account especially relevant to recent events is his insistence that one of the real dangers in these problems was that they made democracies vulnerable to the rise of powerful individuals who succeed by speak[ing] alone in the name of the absent or inattentive crowd; alone they take action amid the universal immobility; they dispose of everything according to their caprice; they change laws and tyrannize mores at will; and you are astonished to see into what a small number of weak and unworthy hands a great people can fall. (952)
Worse, Tocqueville warned that if a charismatic demagogue was able to gain people's attention by speaking on their behalf, it was almost impossible to counter [his] ideas, however implausible or even blatantly false they may be: “What struck me in the United States was the difficulty experienced in dis-abusing the majority of an idea that it has conceived and in detaching the majority from a man it adopts” (1143). It would be hard to write a more prescient sentence. His warning that democratic peoples, “repulsed by complicated systems...are pleased to imagine a great nation all of whose citizens resemble a single model and are directed by a single power,” remains chillingly relevant in an age when many Americans seem intent on supporting measures that have the clear potential to jeopardize American elections (1195).

This, for Tocqueville, was the true gothic potential of democracy—of democracy as the ultimate gothic story—but none of the dangers he had so vividly evoked licensed the “false and cowardly doctrines” that nothing could be done (1285). Concluding with a challenge to believe otherwise, he warned his readers that “the nations of today cannot make conditions among them not be equal; but it depends on them whether equality leads them to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery” (1285). He recognized as clearly as anyone that, as Marx would more famously point out a decade later in his discussion of another newly appointed French King, “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (300). However daunting the challenge to realize the positive aspects of this new era of equality may have been, it only added to the urgency of intervening. For Tocqueville and for us today, modern democracy remained a gothic story whose ending had not yet been written.

**Works Cited**


Notes


2. One can, of course, track these problems over a much longer history. See, for instance, the satirical warning about the dangers of charismatic political charlatans in Eliza Kazan's 1957 film, *A Face in the Crowd*, and Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which was originally given as a 1959 BBC lecture. Hofstadter's essay has gained renewed currency lately because of its relevance to discussions about the political dangers of conspiracy theories.


About the author

Paul Keen is a Professor of English at Carleton University in Canada. His books include *The Humanities in a Utilitarian Age: Imagining What We Know, 1800–1850* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), *Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity, 1750–1800* (Cambridge, 2012), and *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1999).